

VZCZCXR07098
OO RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHIHL RUEHKUK
DE RUEHGB #1309 1061819
ZNY SSSSS ZZH
O 161819Z APR 07 ZDK
FM AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 0753
INFO RUCNRAQ/IRAQ COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

S E C R E T BAGHDAD 001309

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/16/2017

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [IZ](#)

SUBJECT: SADR ORDERS MINISTERS TO WITHDRAW, BUT TO WHAT END?

Classified By: Acting Political Counselor Robert Gilchrist for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (U) In a press conference held at the Council of Representatives on April 16, Sadrists Council of Representatives (CoR) member Nasser al-Rubai'e announced the withdrawal of the Sadrists ministers from Prime Minister Maliki's government. (Note: The Sadrists ministers are the Ministers of Health, Transportation, and Agriculture; and the Ministers of State for Tourism and Antiquities, Governorate Affairs, and Civil Society. End note.) His stated reason was that their withdrawal will give the GOI a chance to build its ministries on a professional rather than a sectarian basis, so that they could better meet the needs of Iraq's people. Al-Rubai'e and fellow Sadrists Baha al-Araji also referred to the Sadrists demand for a timetable for withdrawal of coalition forces, with al-Rubai'e noting the Prime Minister's "failure to meet the demands of the million-man march" in Najaf (for a timetable) and al-Araji stating that the CoR, not the executive branch, should decide on a timetable. Maliki issued a statement welcoming Sadr's move while noting that MNF-I withdrawal was tied to the readiness of Iraqi forces.

Little Practical Impact

¶2. (S) We judge that this move will have little practical impact. The three Ministers of State are minor players at best in the Maliki government and do not control full ministries. The Sadrists Minister of Transportation has not assumed his duties since the previous Sadrists "withdrawal" in late November; Minister of State for National Security Sherwan al-Waeli is currently acting Minister. According to the Minister of Health, the Ministers of Health and Agriculture are planning to remain in their posts, though we are not aware to date of public statements to that effect. The worst case scenario appears to be the status quo, while the best case is that this move gives Maliki a chance to jump start the apparently moribund process of ministerial changes. Unlike the previous Sadrists "withdrawal," it does not appear that Sadrists CoR members plan to stop attending CoR sessions. Fadhila member Bassim al-Sherif confirmed to PolOff that al-Rubai'e told him that despite a report to the contrary on April 15, the Sadrists did not intend to withdraw their CoR members.

Significance of This Move

¶3. (C) The Sadrists appear to derive little political advantage from this move. No one will be fooled by their laying claim to the moral high ground of shunning sectarian politics, though the words, as Maliki noted in his statement, are certainly welcome. For the reasons stated above, it does not seem like the withdrawal of the Sadrists ministers, should the ministers choose to do so, would put pressure on Maliki.

On the other hand, if several ministers choose not to withdraw, their actions will highlight the Sadrists' lack of cohesion. Finally, they diluted their call to establish a timetable for withdrawal by presenting it as a second reason for the announced withdrawal.

¶4. (C) The apparent clumsiness of this move may derive from the nature of Sadr's authority. The Shi'a contacts we talked with emphasized that the withdrawal reflected an order from Muqtada al-Sadr and that Sadrists CoR members had no role in the decision. Deputy Badr commander and CoR member Tahsin al-Azawi argued that the Sadrists had "no strategy and no sense of tactics." He claimed that most of the Sadrists delegation was against the withdrawal but that they had to support it out of fear: "If they oppose it, they could be killed." We can only speculate that Muqtada chose to issue this order to prove that he still commanded the loyalty of his followers and exerted a strong political influence.

¶5. (C) Sadr's order appears to present more political opportunities than dangers to Maliki and other GOI leaders. It may allow Maliki to appoint more professional ministers (even if on a temporary basis before confirmation by the CoR), and it may give non-Sadrists Shi'a politicians further room in their efforts to dampen Sadrists political extremism. The potential danger we see is that of compounding. Sadr's order is in part a challenge to Maliki's authority and effectiveness, and, if other such challenges emerge, it could prove difficult for Maliki to retain enough of a measure of confidence from Iraq's political class or street. Such challenges could include major security incidents or a Tawafiq withdrawal, should that take place.

CROCKER